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SUBJECT: Possible ways forward in political standoff
between Sri Lankan President and Prime Minister

Refs: (A) Colombo 1974

- (B) Colombo 1971, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe continue to consult to find a workable solution to the current political struggle. The PM has remained focused on the peace process throughout the crisis. Reaction from international as well as domestic parties has been focused on possible repercussions for the peace process. Several options remain available to resolve the imbroglio, and attention is now focused on which will play out. END SUMMARY.

President remains steadfast on Defense Ministry

2. (C) As previously reported, following her November 4 takeover of three key ministries and prorogation of Parliament, President Kumaratunga has publicly called for a national government of reconciliation, invited the PM for talks, and met with Norwegian peace facilitators. Throughout these past two weeks, the President has repeatedly stated that she supports the peace process and ceasefire accord. However, the President has remained steadfast that she retain the Defense Ministry, a key component in the peace process. While the initial round of talks with the PM did not break the impasse between the two, there are some signs that a workable compromise might be possible. The President and Prime Minister will meet again on November 18.

PM focused on peace process

3. (C) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, for his part, has remained focused on the peace process throughout his efforts to bring resolution to the current political crisis. Avoiding direct criticism of the President, the PM has worked to provide leadership to his United National Front (UNF) party, to temper UNF hardliners advocating retaliation against the President, and to appeal to the international community for support. He has let key party politicians, such as peace process negotiator G.L. Peiris and chief whip Mahinda Samarasinghe, garner domestic support and argue the GSL's position in the public arena. He maintains that, without control of the defense portfolio, he can not be in charge of the peace process, and thus has offered the President this responsibility. While the Prime Minister publicly says he is willing to work with the President, privately he is skeptical of such cohabitational success.

Concern over President's actions

4. (C) Reaction to the President's November 4-5 actions has centered mainly on the possible effect on the peace process. (Septel addresses the economic ramifications.) Support for the PM has been especially strong, with 130 MPs signing a letter expressing their full confidence, and thousands of supporters rallying in support upon his return. While several political parties have expressed admiration and support for the President, she has also come under criticism -- by segments of the Buddhist clergy, for example -- for causing complications in the peace process at an extremely crucial time. Members of the international community, including the U.S., UK, EU, India and Japan have issued statements and/or publicly expressed concern over the situation, stressing the need for the peace process to continue. Tamil political parties and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have also voiced their concern over the effects that the President-PM wrangling might have on the peace process, but all in all, the Tigers seem to be appraising the situation in the south judiciously.

Effects on Peace Process

15. (C) Even with the Defense Ministry now under the President, there has been no short-term impact to the peace process vis-a-vis the military and the ceasefire. The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) continues to report a high degree of cooperation with the military, and statements made by defense officials (see Ref B) indicate that the military will continue to act with prudence while civilians sort out the political situation. Both the President and the Tigers have stressed the importance of the ceasefire continuing. At a November 14 press conference, however, Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen emphasized the need for clarity in the south in order for real progress in the peace track, and stated that until such clarity existed, there was no space to assist the GSL and the Tigers in peace negotiations. Helgesen has made clear he believes the ceasefire could come undone if the situation drags on unresolved too long.

Ways to Go Forward

16. (C) As the Prime Minister and President propose ways to create a workable solution to the events of the past two weeks, there is much speculation regarding the ultimate way forward. Depending on the current mood of the President or PM, several options appear likely. They include:

-- Returning the Ministries: In this scenario, the President would return control to the government of the defense, interior and mass communications ministries. The government would presumably provide some face-saving method for the President to do so. While this would restore the GSL's control of the peace process, the situation would not resolve the President's cohabitation disagreements that precipitated her November 4 actions. There is talk she might give back Interior and Mass Communication but keep Defense and/or that a Defense Secretary palatable to both the PM and the President

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might be appointed.

-- Cohabitation Committee: According to the PM's idea, a committee comprising representation by the GSL and the Opposition would advise the government on the peace process. This would formalize an arrangement for the President to provide her input on the GSL's peace process decisions and possibly address her contention (which has some merit) that the PM does not "consult" with her regarding negotiations with the Tigers. This is also sometimes referred to as a "council of conciliation."

-- Elections: From the President's perspective, her hope in calling elections would be for her People's Alliance (PA) party to increase its number of seats, and, in coalition with other parties, regain the majority in Parliament. This would put the President in control of the peace process. The PM believes that parliamentary elections would result in more seats for his UNF coalition, serving to strengthen his mandate to lead the peace process. Even if the UNF were to increase its majority, a resolution to the current crisis could still be elusive: the government would still have to cohabitate with the President, who remains in her position regardless of the electoral outcome. Moreover, there is a palpable sense of dread at the prospect of elections which historically are violent and corrupt.

-- Standoff: If neither the PM or President agree on the ministerial or committee option and elections are not called, it is possible that the current standoff could continue. The government would continue its business, with Parliament meeting to work on the budget. Negotiations with the LTTE, however, would likely remain on hold with neither the PM or President in clear control of the peace process. As noted above, this poses a danger to the peace process.

17. (C) COMMENT: Mission's position so far has been to emphasize to all parties the need for the peace process to be supported, while not becoming embroiled in the internecine political struggle between the President and PM. The first test of the changed political landscape and a marker of the PM's and President's willingness to resolve this comes on Wednesday, November 19 when Parliament is set to reconvene and the GSL presents the budget after the two week prorogation. While fresh elections are possible, they would likely be expensive

and violent, and result in a situation not that much different from the current stalemate. Mature cooperation between the PM and President to take the peace process forward would be the best possible outcome, but the two have a long history of rivalry, which they would have to put behind them. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

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